ALCIBIADES II

138A **Socrates:** Alcibiades, are you on your way to pray to the god?

Alcibiades: Definitely, Socrates.

Socrates: You do appear, you know, to have a dour look on your face and to be looking toward the ground, as if you were concerned about something.

Alcibiades: And what would one be concerned about, Socrates?

B **Socrates:** The greatest of concerns, Alcibiades, as it seems to me. For, by Zeus, don't you think that, whenever we pray in private or in public, the gods sometimes give us some things but not others, and that they give to some of us, but not to others?

Alcibiades: Definitely.

Socrates: Does it seem to you that there is need for much caution, in order that one not, without being aware of it, pray for the worst things, thinking them to be good, when the gods are disposed
C to give whatever someone prays for? Just so, they say, Oedipus suddenly prayed that his sons would divide their inheritance with the sword.[1] When he could have asked for some relief from the bad things that he had, his curse sought other bad things in addition to the ones that were already there. So these things took place, and from them many other awful things, but what need is there to mention each?

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[1] Oedipus' sons killed each other fighting for their inheritance, rule of Thebes. He had cursed them for their failure to take care of him in his old age. Socrates' language seems poetic, but is not a close match for any extant account of Oedipus' curse. Compare Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 66–68 (the play is certainly cited at 151b); Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 785–789; Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1383–1392, and fragments 2 and 3 of the cyclic epic *Thebais*. In the first two Oedipus is explicitly said to be sick (Euripides) or mad-hearted (Aeschylus).

Alcibiades: But you, Socrates, are talking about a madman. For does it seem to you that anyone who was healthy would bring himself to pray for such things?

Socrates: Does being mad seem to you the opposite of being sensible?[2]

Alcibiades: Definitely.

D **Socrates:** Do some people seem to you to be foolish, and some sensible?

Alcibiades: They do indeed.

Socrates: Come on then, let's consider just who these people are. It has been agreed that there are some who are foolish and some who are sensible, and that others are mad.

Alcibiades: That has been agreed.

Socrates: Now are there some who are healthy?

Alcibiades: Some are.

Socrates: And others are unhealthy?

139A **Alcibiades:** Of course.

Socrates: And these are not the same?

Alcibiades: No, they're not.

Socrates: Now are there also some others who are in neither condition?

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

Socrates: For it's necessary, if one is a human being, either to be sick or not to be sick.

Alcibiades: It seems so to me.

Socrates: And do you have the same view of sensibleness and foolishness?

Alcibiades: What do you mean?

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[2] *Phronein*, the word translated here and below as "sensible," can also be rendered as "prudent" or even "wise"; so also for cognates. It refers most often to the general good sense that enables one to choose what is best, as at 140e below. For Socrates on madness, compare Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.50, 3.9.6–7. On being sensible, compare *Alcibiades I* 125a–b.

Socrates: If it seems to you only possible to be either sensible or foolish—or is there some third condition in between which makes a person
B neither sensible nor foolish?

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

Socrates: So it is necessary that one be in one or the other of these conditions.

Alcibiades: It seems so to me.

Socrates: Now do you remember agreeing that madness is opposite to being sensible?

Alcibiades: I do.

Socrates: And that there is no third condition in between, which makes a person neither sensible nor foolish?

Alcibiades: I did agree.

Socrates: And how indeed could two things be opposite to one?

Alcibiades: There's no way.

C **Socrates:** So foolishness and madness are probably the same thing.

Alcibiades: It appears so.

Socrates: So, Alcibiades, we would be correct to say that all who are foolish are mad. For example, some of your contemporaries, if some of them are foolish—as they are—and some of those still older than you. For, by Zeus, don't you think that few in the city are sensible, but many indeed are foolish, the ones you call mad?

Alcibiades: I do.

Socrates: Do you think, then, that we would be comfortable sharing
D the city with so many madmen? Would we not, being struck and pelted and suffering all the things that madmen are in the habit of doing, have paid our penalty long ago? But look out, you blessed man: this may not be the case.

Alcibiades: So just what is the case, Socrates? For it's probably not as I thought it was.

Socrates: Nor does it seem so to me. But look at it like this.

Alcibiades: How do you mean?

Socrates: I will tell you. We do take it that some people are sick. Or don't we?

Alcibiades: We definitely do.

E **Socrates:** Now does it seem necessary to you that one who is sick has gout, or a fever, or ophthalmia, or does it seem to you that even if he has none of these conditions he may be sick with some other sickness? For there are surely many sicknesses, and not these alone.

Alcibiades: There are many of them, it seems to me.

Socrates: Now does every case of ophthalmia seem to you to be sickness?

Alcibiades: Yes.

Socrates: Then is every case of sickness ophthalmia?

Alcibiades: It certainly doesn't seem so to me. Yet I'm at a loss about what I should say.

140A **Socrates:** Well, if you put your mind to it with me, searching two together[3] we will perhaps discover it.

Alcibiades: Well, I am putting my mind to it, Socrates, to the best of my ability.

Socrates: Now was it agreed by us that all ophthalmia is sickness, yet all sickness is not ophthalmia.

Alcibiades: It was agreed.

Socrates: And it does seem to me that our agreement was correct. For those with a fever are all sick, yet not all who are sick have a
B fever, or gout, or ophthalmia, I think. All of these sorts of things are sicknesses, but those we call doctors say that their symptoms differ. For they are not alike in all cases, nor do they have similar effects, but each has its own capacity. Yet they are all sicknesses. In the same way we take some people to be craftsmen. Or don't we?

Alcibiades: Definitely.

Socrates: There are cobblers and carpenters and sculptors and a whole host of others, but what need is there to mention each? They all

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[3] Socrates adapts *Iliad* 10.224-6, the Greek equivalent of "two heads are better than one":

> *Going two together, one of them will notice first*
> *what brings advantage; one by himself, even should he be thoughtful,*
> *still there is less intelligence to him, and his cunning has less weight.*

Diomedes has just volunteered to go on a dangerous scouting mission, but hopes to have a companion, who will turn out to be Odysseus. The same line is used at *Symposium* 174d and *Protagoras* 348d.

C possess a part of craftsmanship, which they've divided up, and all of them are craftsmen, yet not all who are craftsmen are carpenters, or cobblers, or sculptors.

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

Socrates: Well, in the same way people have divided up foolishness, and we call those who have the greatest share of it madmen, those who have a little less, silly and stupid. Some of those wanting to use euphemisms say that they are "above it all,"[4] others call them naïve, while still others call them innocents or inexperienced or
D dumb. You'll find many other terms, if you look for them. All these are foolishness, but differ, just as art appeared to us different from art, and sickness from sickness. Or how does it seem to you?

Alcibiades: That's how it seems to me.

Socrates: Let's return to the beginning again from this point. For surely at the beginning of the discussion we also had to consider just who the foolish and the sensible are, since it was agreed that there are some of both. Wasn't it?

Alcibiades: Yes, it was agreed.

E **Socrates:** Now do you take the sensible to be those who know what should be done and what should be said?

Alcibiades: I do.

Socrates: Which are the foolish? Those knowing neither of these things?

Alcibiades: Yes, those.

Socrates: Now those who know neither of these things will, without being aware of it, both say and do what shouldn't be said or done?

Alcibiades: It appears so.

141A **Socrates:** Well, I was saying, Alcibiades, that Oedipus was one of these people. You will still find many people today who are not in a rage, as he was, and do not think that they are praying for bad things for themselves, but good. He didn't think so, or pray so, but there are others who are in the opposite condition. Here's what I think you'd do, first of all. Suppose the god you are on your way to pray to appeared and asked, before you had prayed for

[4] *Megalopsychos*, which more literally means "great-souled," usually refers to nobility, generosity, or arrogance; it is used of Alcibiades himself at 150c.

anything, if it would suffice for you to become tyrant of the city of Athens. If you were to believe that this was something of no account and nothing big, he would add tyranny over all the Greeks,
B and if he were to see that this still seemed too little to you, unless all of Europe were added, he would promise this too, and not only this, but he would promise that, as you want, all men would perceive at once that Alcibiades son of Cleinias was tyrant. I think that you yourself would go off very pleased, thinking that you had hit upon the greatest of goods.[5]

Alcibiades: I think, Socrates, that anyone else would also, if such things happened to him.

C **Socrates:** But yet you wouldn't give your life[6] for the land of, and tyranny over, all the Greeks and barbarians?

Alcibiades: I don't think so. For how could I, if I wasn't going to be able to make any use of them?

Socrates: What if you were going to make bad and harmful use of them? You wouldn't want them like that, would you?

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

Socrates: So you see that it is unsafe either to simply accept whatever
D is given or to pray oneself that it happen, at least if one is going to be harmed through this, or absolutely lose one's life. We could speak of many who have desired tyranny before now and striven to gain it for themselves, thinking that they would accomplish something good, and, because they plotted tyranny, had their lives taken away. I think that you have heard about some things that took place "yesterday or the day before," when Archelaus the tyrant of Macedon was killed by his boyfriend, who loved tyranny no less than Archelaus loved him, and thought that he
E would become tyrant and a happy man.[7] But he, after holding the tyranny for three or four days, was himself plotted against by some others, and met his end.

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[5] For Alcibiades' ambitions and the god's epiphany, compare *Alcibiades I* 105a–c.

[6] Greek *psyche*, elsewhere translated as "soul."

[7] The quotation is from *Iliad* 2.303, where Odysseus vividly remembers, as if it were the day before yesterday, when the Greeks were marshalling against Troy nine years ago and the seer Chalcas predicted their success after nine years. Archelaus murdered the legitimate king of Macedonia in 413 and ruled until he was murdered in 399. He had attracted to his court leading Athenian poets, including Agathon and Euripides; Socrates, we are told, refused a similar invitation (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1398a24). Compare *Gorgias* 470d–471d.

You also see that some of our own fellow citizens—and this we haven't merely heard from others, but know ourselves at first
A hand—desired to become general and achieved this, but some of them are even now still in exile from this city, while others have ended their lives. Those who are thought to have done the best came through many dangers and fears, not only while serving as general, but when they came back to their own home, besieged as they were by informers in no less a siege than that they endured at the hands of the enemy.[8] The result is that some of them would pray to never have been general rather than to have served as
B general. Now if the dangers and labors led to some benefit, it would make sense. But, as it is, it is quite the opposite.

You will find that it is the same way concerning children, that some who prayed before now to have them, had them, only to fall into misfortunes and griefs of the greatest sort. Some of them had children who were completely bad, and spent their whole
C lives in grief. Others' children were good, but met with misfortune which took them from their parents, who thus met with no less ill fortune than the others and would wish that their children had never been born.

But even though these things and many others like them are so very clear, it is rare to find anyone who would refuse what is given, or, if he were going to get something through prayer, would stop praying. The many[9] would not refuse tyranny, were it given to
D them, or the generalship, or many other things that, when present, do more harm than benefit: they would even pray to get them, if they don't have them already. A little while later they sometimes change their tune, unpraying the things they had prayed for at first. I can find no way to deny that it is truly vain for men to blame the gods by claiming that bad things come to them from the gods. "But they themselves by their own recklessness"—or foolishness, whichever we should call it— "have pains beyond what is fated."[10]

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[8] Generals were the highest elected officials in Athens, and like all public officials were subject to scrutiny at the end of their terms.

[9] Greek *hoi polloi*, which is sometimes rendered in the *Alcibiades II* by "most people": see the note at *Alcibiades I*, 110e.

[10] Socrates adapts Zeus' words at Homer, *Odyssey* 1.32–34:

> *Ah, how mortals blame the gods in vain.*
> *For they say that evils come from us. But they themselves*
> *through their own recklessness have pains beyond what is fated.*

Zeus goes on to note that Aegisthus, who seduced Agamemnon's wife, killed Agamemnon upon his return home from Troy, and then was killed by Agamemnon's son, Orestes, had been warned by the gods and thus had nothing to complain about.

E He was probably sensible, Alcibiades, the poet who, it seems to me, was dealing with some mindless friends. He saw that they were doing and praying for things that weren't for the best, but seemed to them to be, and he made this prayer on behalf of all of them in common. He says something like this:

143A *King Zeus, good things, whether we pray for them or not give us, and ward off foul things even when we pray for them.*[11]

So he bids. To me the poet seems to speak both admirably and safely. If you have anything in mind about this, don't keep silent.

Alcibiades: It is difficult, Socrates, to speak against things that have been admirably said. Now I'm aware of how many bad things
B ignorance causes for people, whenever it's the likely reason that we aren't aware that we are doing and, to top it all, praying for, the worst of things for ourselves. Nobody would think this is so, since everyone thinks that he is up to this, to pray for what is best for himself, and not what is worst. For that truly would be like a curse, not a prayer.

Socrates: But perhaps, best of men, a man who is wiser than you and I would say that we aren't speaking correctly in simply blaming
C ignorance, at least if we do not add that ignorance of some things, and for some people, and for people in a certain state, is good, as it is bad for others.

Alcibiades: What do you mean? Is there anything that anyone in any state is better off not knowing than knowing?

Socrates: It seems so to me. But not to you?

Alcibiades: No indeed, by Zeus.

Socrates: Well, I will not charge you with wanting to do to your mother what Orestes did, they say, and Alcmaeon, and if there are any
D others who did the same as they.[12]

Alcibiades: By Zeus, Socrates, hush!

Socrates: You shouldn't, Alcibiades, tell one to hush who says that you wouldn't be willing to do these things, but far more anyone who said the opposite, since this seems to you to be such a fearful thing that one must not even speak of it in this way. But do you think

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[11] The original poet is unknown, and the wording and even the precise extent of the quotation are uncertain, though its gist is clear enough. A version of the poem is included as 10.108 in the *Palatine Anthology*. For Socrates' prayers, compare Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.3.2.

[12] In myth both Orestes and Alcmaeon killed their mothers for killing, or at least helping to kill, their fathers.

that Orestes, if he were sensible and knew what was best for him to do, would have brought himself to do any of these things?

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

E **Socrates:** Nor, I think, anyone else.

Alcibiades: No indeed.

Socrates: Ignorance of what is best is a bad thing, then, it's likely, as is not knowing what is best.

Alcibiades: To me it seems so.

Socrates: Does it also seem bad both for that person himself, and for everyone else?

Alcibiades: I say so.

Socrates: Now let's consider this case also. What if it suddenly occurred to you, because you thought it was better, to take a dagger and go
144A to the house of your own guardian and friend, Pericles,[13] and ask if he were inside, wanting to kill him, and no one else, and they should say that he was inside. I'm not saying that you want to do any of these things. But what if, I'm thinking, this did seem best to you—and surely nothing stops one who does not know what is best from believing that the worst of things is the best. Or doesn't that seem so to you?

Alcibiades: Definitely.

B **Socrates:** Well, if you were to go inside and see that very man, but did not know that it was he and thought he was someone else, would you still bring yourself to kill him?

Alcibiades: No, by Zeus, it doesn't seem so to me.

Socrates: For, surely, it wasn't just anyone you met, but that very man whom you wanted. Wasn't it?

Alcibiades: Yes.

Socrates: Now if you were to try many times, but always, whenever you were going to do this, did not know that it was Pericles, you would never attack him.

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

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[13] Pericles was Athens' most influential politician at the dramatic date of this conversation. On Pericles and his relationship to Alcibiades, see *Alcibiades I* 104b (and the note on that passage) and Section 2 of the Introduction.

Socrates: And does it seem to you that Orestes would have attacked his mother, if, in the same way, he didn't know that it was her?

C **Alcibiades:** I for my part don't think so.

Socrates: For it surely wasn't just any woman he met that he intended to kill, nor anyone's mother, but to kill his own mother himself.

Alcibiades: That's so.

Socrates: So for people who are in this sort of state and have this sort of belief it is better not to know this sort of thing.

Alcibiades: It appears so.

Socrates: You see, then, that ignorance of some things, and for some people, and for people in a certain state, is good, and not bad, as it had seemed to you just now.

Alcibiades: That's likely.

D **Socrates:** Now if you want to consider the next thing, it may perhaps seem strange to you.

Alcibiades: Just what is that, Socrates?

Socrates: Practically speaking, the possession of any other knowledge, if one does not possess knowledge of what is best, rarely benefits, and most often harms the one who has it. Consider it like this. Doesn't it seem necessary to you that, whenever we are going to either do or say something, we must first either believe that we
E know or really know whatever we are so ready to say or do?

Alcibiades: It seems so to me.

Socrates: So the speakers in the Assembly, for example, will give us advice either knowing how to do so or believing that they do—some speaking about war and peace, some about the construction
145A of walls or the maintenance of harbors. And, in a word, whatever the city does regarding another city or itself by itself is all done on the advice given by these speakers.

Alcibiades: That's true.

Socrates: Well, look at what follows from this.

Alcibiades: If I can.

Socrates: You surely call some sensible and some foolish.

Alcibiades: I do.

Socrates: And you call most people foolish, and few sensible.

Alcibiades: Just so.

Socrates: And in both cases you are looking to something?

Alcibiades: Yes.

B **Socrates:** So do you call someone sensible if he knows how to give advice, but does not know whether it is better to do so, or when it is better to do so?[14]

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

Socrates: Nor, I think, do you call anyone sensible who knows how to wage war, but doesn't know when it is better, and for how long it is better. Isn't that so?

Alcibiades: Yes.

Socrates: Nor, then, if someone knows how to kill someone, or deprive him of his money and exile him from his country, but not whether it was better to do this, and to whom it was better to do this?

Alcibiades: No indeed.

C **Socrates:** So whoever knows something of this sort, if knowledge of what is best accompanies him—and this, surely, is the same as the knowledge of what is beneficial, isn't it?

Alcibiades: Yes.

Socrates: It's he that we will say is sensible and a sufficient adviser both for the city and for himself. Of one who isn't this sort we'll say the opposite of this. Or how does it seem to you?

Alcibiades: That's how it seems to me.

Socrates: And what if someone knows how to ride a horse or shoot a bow, or how to box or wrestle or perform in any other contest,
D or do anything else of the sort of things we know by means of art—what will you call whoever knows what turns out better when it is done according to a given art? Isn't he who knows what's done better according to horsemanship a horseman?

Alcibiades: I think so.

Socrates: And for boxing it's a boxer, and for aulos playing it's an aulos player,[15] and the rest, I suppose, analogously to this. Or does it somehow work differently?

Alcibiades: No, that's how it is.

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[14] For a similar discussion of what is better, see *Alcibiades I* 107d–108e.

[15] On the aulos, see the note at *Alcibiades I* 106e.

Socrates: Now does it seem necessary to you that one who is
E knowledgeable about one of these things is a sensible man, or will we say that he's far from it?

Alcibiades: He's far from it, by Zeus.

Socrates: So what sort of community do you think would consist of good archers and aulos players, and good athletes and other artists as well, and mixed in with these the ones we were just talking about, those who know only how to wage war and how to kill, and also men who are public speakers full of political hot air, if all of these are without the knowledge of what is best and without the one
146A who knows when and on whom it is better to make use of each one of these arts?

Alcibiades: I think it would be a poor excuse for a community, Socrates.

Socrates: You would say so, I think, when you saw each one of them vying for honor in and distributing the greatest share in the community

to this
where he himself is at his best.[16]

I mean that which comes out best when done according to the given art. But he errs for the most part regarding what is best for the city and for himself, because, I think, he has put his trust in
B opinion rather than intelligence. This being the case, would we not be correct to say that this sort of community would be full of great confusion and disorder?

Alcibiades: Correct indeed, by Zeus.

Socrates: Now does it seem to us that we must first think that we know or really know whatever we are ready to do or say?

Alcibiades: It does seem so.

Socrates: And if someone does something he knows, or thinks he knows,
C and "beneficially" is added, we must consider him profitable both to the city and to himself?

Alcibiades: Why, of course.

Socrates: And, I think, if it's the opposite of this, neither to the city nor to himself.

Alcibiades: Certainly not.

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[16] At *Gorgias* 485e, Plato has Callicles paraphrase and quote this fragment from Euripides' *Antiope* at greater length: "Each man is brilliant in this, and hastens after this,

attributing the greatest share of the day to this
where he himself is at his best."

Socrates: And does it still seem to you the same way, or is it different somehow?

Alcibiades: No, it's like this.

Socrates: Now did you say that you called most people foolish, and few sensible?

Alcibiades: I did.

Socrates: And we say again that the many are mistaken about what is best, since, I think, they trust in opinion rather than intelligence.

D **Alcibiades:** We do say so.

Socrates: So it is profitable for most people neither to know nor to think that they know, if, that is, they are more eager to do the things they know or think they know, and in so doing will be harmed most of the time rather than benefited.

Alcibiades: That is very true.

Socrates: You do see, then, that I was in reality obviously correct to say
E that the possession of other knowledge, if someone possesses it without knowledge of the best, is probably rarely beneficial and most often harmful to the one who has it?

Alcibiades: Even if it didn't seem so then, it does seem so now, Socrates.

Socrates: So if either a city or a soul is going to live correctly it must get hold of this knowledge, just as one who is sick must get hold
147A of a doctor, and one who is going to sail safely a helmsman. For without this, the more brilliantly the fair wind of fortune blows for gaining property, bodily vigor, or anything else of this sort, the more errors necessarily come to pass from such things. He who has what it takes to be called a polymath and a jack of all trades, but is bereft of this knowledge of the best and is led about by each one of these other sorts of knowledge, won't he really experience
B a great storm, and justly too, since, I think, he continues on the ocean without a helmsman, cruising for no long lifetime? The result here too, it seems to me, is the one the poet describes, making an accusation against someone, I suppose, that "many things he knew, but badly he knew all of them."[17]

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[17] This paraphrase is one of our few pieces of evidence for the *Margites*, a mock-epic sometimes attributed to Homer that detailed the various misadventures of its idiotic title character. Socrates' interpretation of it below is every bit as forced as his interpretation of Simonides at *Protagoras* 339a–348c.

Alcibiades: And just how is the saying of the poet fitting, Socrates? For it doesn't seem to me to be at all relevant.

Socrates: It's very relevant indeed. But, best of men, he speaks enigmatically, both he and nearly all poets. For all of poetry is by nature enigmatic and not a matter for just any man to understand.
C Given its nature, whenever it takes hold of a man who is envious and does not want to reveal his wisdom but to hide it as much as possible, understanding just what each poet has in mind is clearly supernaturally difficult. For you don't think, surely, that Homer, the most godlike and wisest of the poets, did not recognize that it is impossible to know badly—for it's he who says that Margites
D knows many things, but knows all of them badly. But he made a riddle, I think, using "badly" in place of "bad," and "he knew" in place of "to know." Put together, then, it becomes this (not in the original meter, but this is what he wanted to say): "he knew many things, but it was bad for him to know all of them." It's clear, then, that if it was bad for him to know many things, he didn't amount to much, at least if one should trust what has been said previously.

E **Alcibiades:** Well, that's the way it seems to me, Socrates. Indeed, I would find it difficult to trust in anything else that's said, if not in that.

Socrates: And the way it seems to you is correct.

Alcibiades: Then again, it seems otherwise to me.

Socrates: But, come, by Zeus! For you see, surely, what it means to be this lost, and you seem to me to share in being lost yourself. You change back and forth, you know, and don't stop anywhere, but however it may seem to you, you toss it aside again and it no
148A longer seems that way to you. What if, even now, the god you are on the way to pray to were to appear, before you had prayed for anything, and ask if one of those things that were spoken of at the beginning will suffice for you, or if he were to leave it to you to pray for yourself? Just how do you think that you would, by accepting something given by him or praying for something yourself, hit upon what was called for?[18]

Alcibiades: Well, by the gods, I don't have anything to say to you offhand, Socrates. This seems to me to be something as ludicrous
B as Margites, and truly calling for much caution: how not to pray, without being aware of it, for what is bad, when it seems to be

[18] For Socrates' rebuke of Alcibiades, compare *Alcibiades I* 113e; for Alcibiades' vacillation, compare *Alcibiades I* 116e-117a; for the imagined divine epiphany, compare *Alcibiades I* 105a.

good, and then a little later, as you were saying, sing a different tune, unpraying whatever was prayed for at first.

Socrates: Then doesn't that poet know something more than us, the one I mentioned at the beginning of our discussion, who bid the gods to ward off foul things even when we prayed for them?

Alcibiades: It seems so to me.

C **Socrates:** Well, Alcibiades, the Lacedaemonians also esteemed this man, or observed this for themselves, and in both private and public they always make a very similar prayer, bidding the gods to give them admirable things in addition to good ones. No one ever hears them pray for more than that. This is why up to this point in time they have been no less fortunate than any other people. If, after all, they too have not been fortunate in all things, this is not
D because of their prayer, but it is up to the gods, I think, either to give whatever someone prays for or the opposite of that.

I want to recount something else, which I once heard from some old men. The Athenians and Lacedaemonians were at odds, and whenever a battle took place our city always met with misfortune both by land and by sea and was never able to get the
E upper hand. So the Athenians, troubled by this and at a loss to find out what means they must use to turn aside the bad things they were suffering, took counsel and decided that it was best to send to Ammon[19] and ask him. Now in addition to asking that, they asked him just why it was that the gods gave victory to the Lacedaemonians rather than to them. "We," they said, "give more numerous and more admirable sacrifices than the rest of the Greeks; we adorn the sanctuaries of the gods with offerings as no others do; we give the gods the most expensive and most
149A august processions each year; and we spend more than all the other Greeks combined. But the Lacedaemonians," they said, "have never been concerned with any of this, and care so little for the gods that they are always sacrificing maimed animals and honor the gods in every way no little bit less fittingly than we do, though they possess no less wealth than our city does." When they had said this, they asked what they should do to find release from the
B bad things they were suffering. The priest who speaks for the god made no other answer than this—for clearly the god would not allow it—but called them and said, "To the Athenians Ammon

[19] Ammon, the chief god of the Egyptian pantheon, was identified with Zeus by the Greeks.

says this. He declares that he would prefer the reverent Laconic speech[20] to all the sacrifices of the Greeks put together." This much he said, and no more.

Now by this "reverent speech" it seems to me that the god meant nothing else than their prayer. For, in reality, it is far superior to the prayers of others. The rest of the Greeks, those who
C have brought out cows with gilded horns, and the others who give the gods offerings, pray for whatever it happens to be, whether good or bad. Hearing their irreverent speech, then, the gods do not accept their expensive processions and sacrifices. Rather, it seems to me that there is need of much caution and consideration as to just what is to be said and what not.

You'll also find very similar things said in Homer. He says that
D the Trojans, when they were making their bivouac

Sacrificed complete hecatombs to the immortals.

And the winds bore the smell of the sacrifice from the plain to the sky

sweet it was; but the blessed gods took no part of it,
nor wished to; for sacred Troy was hateful to them
and Priam and the people of Priam of the stout ash spear.[21]

E So it did them no good to sacrifice and give gifts in vain, hated as they were by the gods. For the gods, I think, are not of the sort to be turned by gifts, like some bad moneylender. Rather, we are saying something naïve in deeming the Lacedaemonians worthy because they excel in this. For it would be an awful thing if the gods looked to our gifts and sacrifices and not to our souls, to see
150A whether we are pious and just. They look to this, I think, far more than to these expensive processions and sacrifices; nothing stops either an individual or a city that has done many wrongs to the gods, and many to men, from performing these every year. But the gods, as they do not take bribes, despise all of these things, as the god and the priest who speaks for him say. For both among gods and among intelligent men both justice and being sensible

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[20] The Greek for "reverent speech" is *euphēmia*; forms of it are translated by "euphemisms" at 140c and "hush" at 143d.

[21] The lines related in meter (indented above) are found in no manuscript of the *Iliad* and are rejected by modern editors. The line partially quoted and partially paraphrased in between the lines of verse, *Iliad* 8.549, is in our manuscript text. The verses could reflect an alternative oral tradition of Homer, but, given their aptness here, are more likely a deliberate misquotation. The Trojans, in Achilles' absence, had managed to push the Greeks back and camp out on the plains of Troy; but they would, of course, eventually be pushed back and defeated.

B are probably surpassingly honored. And the sensible and the just are no others than those who know what one should do and say both to gods and to men. But I'd like to hear whatever it is that you think about this.

Alcibiades: Well, Socrates, it seems to me no different than it seems to you and to the god. For it wouldn't be proper for me to vote against the god.

Socrates: Do you remember saying that you were absolutely lost about
C how to avoid praying, without being aware of it, for bad things that seemed to be good?

Alcibiades: I do.

Socrates: You see, then, that it is not safe for you to go to the god to pray to him. He could hear you speaking irreverently and accept nothing from your sacrifice—and it's possible that it could turn out even worse for you. So to me it seems best that you keep quiet. Because you are "above it all" (this is the most beautiful of the terms for foolishness), I don't think you'd be willing to use the prayer of the
D Lacedaemonians. So it is necessary to wait until one learns what stance one should take toward gods and toward men.

Alcibiades: So when will this time be at hand, Socrates, and who is going to educate me? I think I'd be delighted to see just who that person is.

Socrates: He's the one concerned about you. But it seems to me, just as Homer says that Athena removed the mist from the eyes of Diomedes,

so he might well recognize both god and man alike.[22]

E so too it is necessary that one remove the mist from your soul, the mist that is there now, and only then apply that through which you are going to recognize both bad and good alike. You don't seem to me to be able to do this now.

Alcibiades: Let him take away the mist, or anything else, if he wants to. For I am prepared to flee from none of his commands, whoever the person is, at least if it will make me better.

151A **Socrates:** And it is indeed amazing how much eagerness he has on your behalf.

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[22] *Iliad* 5.128, put into the past tense. Athena restores the wounded Greek Diomedes, in the midst of his great run against the Trojans, removes the mist that prevents him from telling immortals from mortals, and tells him he should shun battle with the gods, except for Aphrodite.

Alcibiades: Well, it seems best to me to put off the sacrifice until that time.

Socrates: You're correct. For it is more safe than to run so great a risk.

B **Alcibiades:** But what's next, Socrates? Well, since you seem to me to have given me admirable advice, I'll crown you with this wreath.[23] We'll give the gods both wreaths and the other customary things when I see that day coming. It will come before long, if the gods are willing.

Socrates: Well, I accept this, and I'd gladly see myself accepting anything else given by you. It's just like what Euripides has Creon say, when he sees Teiresias wearing wreaths and hears that he has taken the first fruits from the enemy through his art:

I hold your victorious wreaths to be an omen,
C *for we are in stormy seas, as you know yourself.*[24]

Just so, I hold this opinion of yours to be an omen. It seems to me that I am in no less stormy seas than Creon, and I would like to be victorious over your lovers.

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[23] Compare *Symposium* 213e.

[24] Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 858–859. As Teiresias returns to Thebes after helping the Athenians to a victory, Creon asks him how Thebes can fight off the attack of the Seven Against Thebes, the army led by Polyneices, son of Oedipus, whose brother Eteocles had refused to share rule with him as they had agreed. Teiresias reveals that Creon must sacrifice his son Menoeceus if Thebes is to defeat the attackers; he refuses to do so, but Menoeceus kills himself to save the city. See the discussion at the end of Section 5 of the Introduction.